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ABSTRACT

The concept of social capital refers to the resources of networks, norms or shared values, and trust to which individuals have access as community members. A reason to consider intergenerational learning in the context of social capital is awareness of unequal access to positive social capital and the risk that social exclusion and disadvantage will result in negative social capital. Although not usually tied explicitly to a social capital framework, a frequent rationale for intergenerational programming is its effectiveness in reducing stereotypes of young and old and improving mutual understanding and trust. Attitudinal changes are a worthy goal, yet some suggest making them the primary justification and outcome of programs trivializes intergenerational interaction and ignores the larger social purpose--the learning inherent in effective intergenerational activities. Outcomes of intergenerational learning are that youth learn employability skills and the value of service, develop self-esteem, and build their stock of social capital for future life and work; elders benefit from social and mental stimulation, the opportunity to support the youth, and reduction of stereotypes about aging and dementia. Other projects demonstrate links between human capital and social capital; creation of new social networks among teachers, elders, and children; measurable impact of older adult tutors on students' reading performance, attitudes about reading, self confidence, and motivation to read. (Contains 12 references.) (YLB)

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Intergenerational Learning and Social Capital

The elder cannot be an elder if there is no community to make him an elder. The young child cannot feel secure if there is no elder, whose silent presence gives him or her hope in life. The adult cannot be who he or she is unless there is a strong sense of the other people around. (M. P. Somé, ***Ritual Power, Healing, and Community.*** Portland, OR: Swan/Raven & Co., 1993, p. 2)

Knowledge has been transmitted from one generation to another throughout history, often informally or incidentally. In the last 40 years, more systematic and formal intergenerational programs have arisen, with growing recognition of their integral relationship to lifelong learning and broader social purposes (Hanks and Icenogle 2001). Ideally, the generations derive mutual benefits from participation and the learning is reciprocal. Features of effective intergenerational learning have commonalities with the characteristics of social capital. This *Digest* examines the relationship between intergenerational learning and social capital and describes research findings and promising programs illustrating how intergenerational programs contribute to learning and the development of social capital.

How Intergenerational Learning Builds Social Capital

The concept of social capital refers to the resources of networks, norms or shared values, and trust to which individuals have access as community members; it is both an individual and a community asset (Balatti and Falk 2002). Individuals who can draw on these tangible and intangible resources and relationships will have enhanced life opportunities, and communities in which trust, reciprocity and social networks are strong will benefit from collective action and cooperation (ibid.). Two dimensions of social capital development (chronological and external) bear a resemblance to features of intergenerational programs:

> [The *chronological* dimension] is fundamental in the processes that transmit social and cultural norms. The research makes clear how past learning needs to be reconciled with the present, in the context of…a future gaze or "vision." *Externality* refers to the relationships that people have with the outside world.… Externality is not only about developing and using networks…It is about having the identity resource that allows one to see oneself as a member of the larger community of communities that comprise society. (ibid., pp. 286-287)

One reason to consider intergenerational learning in this context is awareness of unequal access to positive social capital and the risk that social exclusion and disadvantage will result in negative social capital (Boström 2002). The family is typically the individual's initial source of social capital, but the social changes of the last half century are having an impact on this source: increased life expectancy, greater mobility, increased reliance on nonfamilial caregivers at both ends of the life span, a more age-segregated society (e.g., retirement communities and youth culture), and decline in civic participation (Boström 2002; Loewen 1996). Economic and social changes have resulted in "changes in the social contract and evolving expectations about the relative position of generations in society" (Hanks and Icenogle 1999, p. 52). The issue of generational equity arises: to some, older people are a burden rather than a resource, and in light of the increased time it takes to become economically productive today, children may be viewed this way as well. These factors work against characteristics of positive social capital such as mutual acceptance of obligations, exchange of ideas and information, and action for the common good (Schuller et al. 2002).

Although not usually tied explicitly to a social capital framework, a frequent rationale for intergenerational programming is its effectiveness in reducing stereotypes of young and old and improving mutual understanding and trust. Such attitudinal changes are a focus of much of the research, and many of the findings show more positive perceptions of aging and the elderly among children and young adults, more willingness to work with the elderly among health occupations students, and changed perceptions of youth on the part of older adults (e.g., Granville 2001; Kaplan 2001; Loewen 1996). However, in other studies, the findings about attitude changes are mixed or demonstrate that the changes may not last long (Kaplan 2001; Loewen 1996).

Attitudinal changes are a worthy goal, yet some suggest that making them the primary justification and outcome of programs trivializes intergenerational interaction and ignores the larger social purpose (Hanks and Icenogle 2001). For Loewen (1996), a more compelling rationale is the learning inherent in effective intergenerational activities. Learning, as a social activity, results from drawing on and building social capital through interactions with others (Schuller et al. 2002). Research by Balatti and Falk (2002) and Schuller et al. (2002) demonstrates how learning creates conditions that help develop the building blocks of social capital: it (1) extends, enriches, and reconstructs social networks and builds trust and relationships; (2) influences the development of shared norms and the values of tolerance, understanding, and respect; and (3) affects individual behaviors and attitudes that influence community participation.

Outcomes of Intergenerational Learning

Intergenerational programs are usually one of the following types (Kaplan 2001): children and youth serving older people, elders serving children and youth, and adults and youth collaborating in service and/or learning. Research cited by Loewen (1996), Granville (2001), and Kaplan (2001) suggests that successful intergenerational learning fulfills age-appropriate developmental needs of youth and adults, is relational and reciprocal (drawing on the strengths or assets of each generation), and creates a community in which learning results through collective engagement in authentic activities. A few studies explicitly link social capital and the outcomes of intergenerational programs (e.g., Boström 2002; Granville 2002; Kaplan 2001). In other research demonstrating learning outcomes, links to social capital may be inferred, and some promising new programs reinforce these findings. Some of these studies and programs are described next.

Granville (2001) examined the outcomes of a British project that brought together two groups with "negative" social capital who are usually excluded from powerful social networks: youth offenders undergoing rehabilitation and older adults with physical disabilities or dementia. An instance of youth serving elders, the program provided community service placements for offenders in elder care centers. Each generation offered its own strengths: the youth brought energy, enthusiasm, companionship, and physical strength; the elders shared concern for the younger generation, nonjudgmental and accepting attitudes, and appreciation for the youths' contributions. Trust worked on multiple levels: prison and care center officials trusting offenders, youth trusting that their service would not be exploited, the elders trusting their caregivers to provide a safe environment, and young and old learning to trust each other. The project emphasized the shared values of mutual respect, tolerance, and inclusiveness. Interview and observational data showed that the youth learned employability skills and the value of service, developed self-esteem, and built their stock of social capital for future life and work. The elders benefitted from social and mental stimulation, the opportunity to support the youth by ensuring that they were not placed in compromising situations, and the reduction of stereotypes about aging and dementia.

The Alabama Intergenerational Network for Service-Learning (Hanks and Icenogle 2001) demonstrates the links between human capital

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and social capital. College students in gerontology and business helped adults over 50 in career transition develop work-related skills such as self-esteem, resume development, and computer skills. Data from pre/postprogram surveys showed that trust and communication were built through the shared norms of the workplace, allaying misconceptions older and younger workers had about each other. However, the activities were not intentionally designed for this purpose, but resulted from the synergy surrounding authentic engagement in learning: "This project found its major success in addressing concrete training needs. Certainly, attitudes and feelings did change, but as a byproduct of interaction that centered on the two generations working together in skill-building activities" (p. 66).

An example of elders serving youth, the Swedish Granddad program involved men over age 55 as educators, companions, co-learners, mentors, and tutors for elementary students (Boström 2002). Surveys of the men and students showed that new social networks were created among teachers, elders, and children; the elders provided models of social norms and values that met developmental needs, especially for boys. The "granddads" benefitted from participation in lifelong learning, the opportunity to contribute to the community, and the expansion of their social network. A key factor was that the interaction was regularly scheduled and long term (6 months-2 years), resulting in "an intergenerational transmission of both learning and social capital" (p. 523).

Other examples of adults helping youth are the Foster Grandparent Programs and Retired and Senior Volunteer Programs. Blake (2000) found that older adult tutors in these programs had a measurable impact on students' reading performance, attitudes about reading, self-confidence, and motivation to read. More than that, the frequency of tutoring sessions enabled participants to develop trusting relationships. Literacy is a social practice and its development is intensely social: "Something unique stems from the nature of the intergenerational relationship. The dynamic of that relationship—reciprocal and accepting—gives rise to opportunities for learning, growth, and understanding for both participants" (ibid., p. 1).

Intergenerational programs typically focus on two generations separated from one another and opinion is divided as to whether the generation in between should be included (Granville 2002; Whitehouse et al. 2002). The following examples of programs in which adults and youth work together in service and/or learning involve all generations. In the Public Policy Institute (Murdock and Paterson 2002), youth and adults learn the core concepts of civic engagement and the value of deliberative dialogue. Different learning and interaction styles between the generations resulted initially in some mistrust and dissatisfaction. Alterations to the teaching methods and group procedures enabled a learning community to develop in which adults recognized the young people as a source of information and alternative perspectives; the youth learned to express their opinions on issues.

Community Builders is a promising program at Wartburg College that displays many characteristics of social capital development ("About Community Builders" 2002). Community members of all ages participate in real and virtual "neighborhoods"—intergenerational learning communities mediated by college students. The link to social capital is explicit in the project rationale:

> The purpose of this project is to use the assets of community members with different cognitive, social, civic, and intergenerational backgrounds and skills to build and strengthen the community they share. These "community builders" are individuals who learn from one another in the quest to attain this common goal while developing and enhancing their own respective skill sets, which add value to their individual lives and the larger communities of which they are a part.... This creation of "social capital" is consequential to the health and well-being of a democratic society. (ibid., executive summary, p. 1)

Another new program example is The Intergenerational School in Cleveland, Ohio (http://www.intergenschool.org/; Whitehouse et al. 2002). Intentionally multidirectional and multigenerational, the school is based on the premises that learning is a lifelong process and that knowledge is socially constructed in the context of community. It represents the highest level of a typology of intergenerational programs: a shared learning environment designed to meet learning goals of individuals in different age groups. Individual and community learning goals focus on behavioral and cognitive abilities, learners' relationships to their families and community, and their broader contribution to civic life.

Granville's (2002) review of intergenerational practice in the United Kingdom supports the ability of intergenerational activity to develop community capacity and build social capital through creation of new community networks and support systems. Research (Granville 2002; Kaplan 2001; Loewen 1996) demonstrates that effective intergenerational programs (1) are intentional, reciprocal, sustained, and asset or strength based; (2) provide training for young and old to prepare them for participation; (3) involve the targeted age groups in the planning; and (4) use the strengths of one generation to meet the needs of the other. Research on programs that have an explicit social capital focus, such as Community Builders and The Intergenerational School, is needed to provide more evidence of this broader outcome of intergenerational learning. Such research not only may lead to better intergenerational programs but may also be an opportunity to examine social policy and rethink how we construct our basic institutions (Kaplan 2001).

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